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A National Security Council primer

WE have been hearing much about the NSC, and we will be hearing more come Thursday, when the Tower Commission makes its report. What is it, and how did it get to the center of the Washington stage?

It is the National Security Council. It was set up by act of Congress in 1947 alongside the Central Intelligence Agency. Its prime promoter was James Forrestal, at the time secretary of defense. He wanted a place where he could talk out his defense problems with the president, the secretary of state, and a few others.

The council itself consists by statute of four members. They are the president, the vice-president, the secretary of state, and the secretary of defense. To this are added two "statutory advisers." They are the director of central intelligence and the chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff. There is an "official" attached to the council. His proper title is assistant to the president for national security affairs.

The press habitually refers to the assistant to the president for national security affairs as the national-security adviser to the president. The word adviser is not in the official title. He is not supposed to be an adviser. His original function was that of an assistant to the president. His job was to see to it that the views of the concerned departments of government reached the president whenever a decision in the foreign policy area was pending. His function was not to have an opinion of his own, but to channel opinions to the president.

The system worked as originally intended right through the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Some who have studied the history of the institution think it began to get off the tracks during the Vietnam war, when Walt Rostow seemed to shape the information flowing to the president in a pro-war direction. His critics say he became an advocate of the war rather than objective channel of information and opinion to the president.

The system really changed when Henry Kissinger took over. No one ever suggested that Dr. Kissinger suffered from a passion for anonymity. He be-

came not only an adviser in fact to the president. He was from the start of his tenure in the post a principal shaper of foreign policy.

The staff of the NSC at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration consisted of nine or 10 officers (a veteran member is not sure which). It grew somewhat under John Kennedy but exploded under Dr. Kissinger, who converted it into a miniature foreign office.

The first use of the NSC staff in actual foreign policy operations occurred with Dr. Kissinger. He traveled. He conducted diplomatic negotiations. He made a secret trip to China, on his own. The staff work for that trip was done inside the NSC staff, not by the State Department. Incidentally, even the vice-president (Spiro Agnew at the time) was not told about the China trip in advance. He happened to make an anti-Chinese speech while Dr. Kissinger was actually on his way to Peking.

But even Dr. Kissinger at his most innovative did not use the NSC staff for the kind of things that have happened during the Reagan administration.

No one in earlier administrations used the NSC staff for channeling guns to contras in Nicaragua or carrying cakes and guns to an ayatollah's henchmen in Iran.

The reason they were done this time arises out of the difference between the CIA and the NSC. Both were set up at the same time by act of Congress, but the CIA was set up as a department of government that was subject, like all government agencies, to congressional oversight. It must report its clandestine operations (not instantly, but in reasonable time) to oversight committees of the Congress.

The NSC staff was and still is considered to be part of the personal staff of the president and is not under congressional supervision. The CIA gets its money from Congress. The NSC staff is paid out of White House funds. Congress can summon the director of the CIA to its hearing rooms. Members of the White House staff go there only with the president's consent. He can plead executive privilege if he wants his staff or their doings to remain private.